

Exteriorization of Psychological Alienation in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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Abstract – Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) portrays the psychological alienation of major characters of the novel. The paper primarily focuses on the exteriorization of the interior of Maya's cocoon who is a spoiled and pampered child of a wealthy father and has a well to do husband, but is emotionally starved. Her problems are not physical but psychical, due to the incompatibility of her temperaments with that of her husband. Maladjustment with Gautama is the root cause of Maya's alienation. Edmund Fuller rightly puts, "man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but also from inner problems...a conviction of isolation, randomness, meaninglessness in his way of existence"(3). Indeed, Maya suffers because of her inner conflict whose own world impinges on the practical world of her husband that makes her feel dejected and alienated. Albinotic fear of her death due to astrologer's prediction further aggravates her situation and in order to get out of this psychological alienation, she kills Gautama and later on probably commits suicide at the end.

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INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, is a story of woman whose own world impinges on the practical world of her husband that makes her feel dejected and alienated. Maya is a spoiled and pampered child of a wealthy father and has a well to do husband, but is emotionally starved. She has married a man twice her age which has probably reduced her chances for a healthy relationship with her husband. This temperamental incompatibility and their attitude to life have strained their relationship and have deprived them of their marital bliss. They feel themselves as two opposite sides of the coin and the two banks of river which seems to live together. Darshan Singh Maini rightly points out their temperamental diversities when he says:

Whereas Gautama is an efficient, pragmatic, unsentimental person, "a thinking reed", Maya, as her name signifies, is not only a creature of graceful illusion, but also a creature of song, dance and flower. (218)

Gautama is interested in Urdu poetry but he is far from being sentimental. On the contrary, Maya is too sensitive and sentimental to ignore the slightest injury to her feelings. When Toto, her pet dog, dies, Maya plunges into the deep ocean of grief. She can't bear the sight of corpse and she rushes to the tap "to wash the vision from the eyes"(Desai 5). But Gautama on the other hand remains unperturbed. Instead of giving

sympathy to Maya, he remarks: "It is all over, come and drink your tea, and stop crying" (6).

Maya wants Gautama's love to give meaning to her existence and to fulfill her desires. But she always feels herself away from her husband, for "he was not on my (her) side, but across a river, across a mountain, and would always remain so" (114). He seems to arrive at detachment like Buddha and is unaffected by her sorrow. There is utter loneliness in their house and she cries: "I am alone" (22). There is hardly any emotional bond between the two. She herself feels, "had there been a bond between us, he would have felt its pull. But, of course, there was none. There was no bond, no love hardly any love"(108).

There is probably a wide gap in the love language of Gautama and Maya. Although they are living together as husband and wife, they are strangers to each other. They hardly try to understand each other's emotions. The novel is replete with the incident which shows the lack of communication due to their temperaments differences occasionally. They talk and converse while strolling but they remain in the world of their own dreams. Once, a next door neighbouring girl of Maya and Gautama was playing a musical instrument. Maya was drawn towards the music whereas Gautama was lost in his own world and didn't pay any attention to it. Maya felt utterly alone in the company of the bleak and

comfortless figure like her husband. As K.R. S. Iyengar explains:

What is real to her is shadowing to him, what are facts and hard realities to him have no interest for her. It is the inner spiritual contact that fails to clicks. (446)

This lack of communication continues in another incident where Maya expresses her desire to go to South to see the Kathakali dances. But Gautama dismisses her desire:

I suggest you wait till a Kathakali troupe comes to give a performance in Delhi, as it is bound to come time - perhaps in winter. It will be less expensive. (49)

Further Gautama is lover of Urdu poetry and but he doesn't understand the tender feelings of his wife. Gautama is found over busy in his work and as such be not able to give proper attention to Maya's soft willing body. He seems to have neither the time nor the capability to show tenderness towards her. He is so much absorbed in his work that he hardly shows any interest in her.

Maya is responsible for her alienation. Though Gautama hardly bothers to take care of her emotions and talks to her and further more never tries to make any attempt to make Maya tell her feelings. Maya, too, never tries to make herself clear to Gautama. She is always haunted by death fear of the astrologer's prophecy from her horoscope. She faces numberless emotional and psychological disturbances but never tells anything to Gautama. She even does not reveal the contents of the horoscope, when Gautama asks him but she simply stammers, "Believe me-Gautama, I don't remember" (151). Gautama generally treats Maya as a child, and as a lighthearted woman who is not worthy of his confidence. Maya, too, moans:

In his world there were vast areas in which he could never permit me and he could not understand that I could even wish to enter them, foreign as they were to me. (104)

Maya's childlessness is another cause of her psychological alienation. Her mother's untimely death has deprived mother and her adolescent child. Being motherless child, she wants to give her whole love to her child. But she has no issue even after the four years of her marriage. In order to compensate her loneliness; she has shifted her love to her pet dog, Toto. She herself feels:

Childless women do develop fanatic attachments to their pets. It is no less a relationship than that of women and her child, no less worthy of reverence, and agonized remembrance. (10)

That's why death of Toto seems to her death of her own child. She realizes that it was not her pet's death

which filled her with despair rather it was, "another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps as yet not even experienced" (8). After Toto she has no one on whom she can shower her love and so she feels alienated.

Maya's father fixation is also responsible for her psychological alienation. Being a motherless child, she is given over protected love and affection by the father. Too much love and protection has stunned her capability to grow, think and act as an entity. It justifies Usha Bande:

When a parent like Maya's father, adores a child blindly and expects complete surrender from him he or she prevents a child from arriving at a correct self-evaluation. (21)

Maya cannot erase her father's picture from her mind even while living with her husband. Her "capacity to love another human being, other than her father would be the litmus test of her psychic health" (Krishnaswamy 8). She marries Gautama only because she feels him the real image of her father. Gautama, too, realizes the fact that Maya has a very obvious father-obsession, that is why she married him but he proves to be a poor substitute to her. He even blames Maya's father for spoiling her and for shutting her away from the realities of life. So, Maya becomes a 'spoilt child' who is unable to adjust herself with her husband. She recalls playing simple incidents like battledore - and - shuttlecock in her father's presence; but now "no one, no one else, loves me as my father does"(46). She longs for Gautama's company, but he is busy in his own world. She feels that she never gets proper attention from him as she used to get from her father who loved and understood her properly. She feels that the world of her father was a world of love and tenderness whereas the world of Gautama is a world of absolute detachment and arid philosophy. She had a life of freedom at her father's house and a life of loveless enchantment at her husband's house. To Maya, as Usha Bande feels this whole world is "imperceptibly linked with her father's undivided affection" (19). In the way, Maya's father obsession hinders her from becoming a successful wife and making Gautama a successful husband.

Maya is also feels lonely due to her escapist nature. Being dissatisfied from her present, she loves to escape into her childhood and even to Nature. She loves to recall her childhood days spent at Lucknow and Darjeeling where she was brought up tenderly by a doting father as "a toy princess in a toy world" (89). Now in her in-law's house, she wants to recreate her childhood romantic world with her "favourite colours, set moving to my (her) favourite tunes" (41). Her escaping into childhood memories gives her soothing feeling and she forgets the loneliness of her present world. Gautama is so unsympathetic towards Maya that she can't share her joys and sorrows with him. That's why, while strolling with him, she wants to escape in Nature. She likes the company of white,

Petunias for which drive away "her into the world that knew no pain." (21). She wants to spend more and more time in the company of nature. She prefers dark night rather than long frustrating day. But Nature, too, doesn't give her solace. The moon, the stars, the darkness remind her of real world of death and she wants to escape. Even she wants to escape from her relationship with her husband which seems to her "as a relationship with death." (Sharma 31) Her escape from the world and Keatsian wish, for death is romantic in its essence and she says "I should not mind dying now, after all. At this very moment. Then it would remain like this, for me" (139).

Albino's prophecy and Maya's obsession with death has made Maya psychologically alien. The astrologer predicted to her:

My child, I would not speak of it if I saw it on your face alone. But look, look at the horoscope. Stars don't lie ... Death to one of you. When you are married and you shall be married young ... Death - an early one - by unnatural causes. (33)

This Albino who has read her horoscope and predicts death for one of the partners after four years of married life always remains in her fevered brain and as a dark figure in her married life and prevents to live her normal married life. She is always conscious of death. This obsession makes her feel dejected and makes her even insane. Her inner fears and anxieties are shown through Toto's death. Death fear has crippled her thinking, her being and her living. Gradually, death fear takes the form of hallucination. Usha Bande has beautifully captured the hallucination of Maya when she says:

In search of glory, the neurotic (Maya) starts making neurotic claims on the world. Whatever grandiose image he has created of himself must be recognized by world...It is humanly impossible to live upon the standards laid down by image. When it is not realized, a person feels worthless and develops a despised image. This is his despised self." (*The Novels* 32)

In the mood of hallucination, she looks at the moon assuming terrible colours--from dead silence to thunderous drumming, from vision of fate to the albino astrologer. The moon seems to Maya vast and ghost like white, 'a demonic creature' and 'the fierce dancer'.

I was aware of a great, dead silence in which my eyes opened to a vision that appeared through the curtains of years, one by one falling back till I saw again that shadow. A black and evil shadow...It was, I remembered it now, Fate. (31-32)

The stars and the darkness in between remind her of the "long journey of the dead from one birth to

another" (22). While sitting in the garden, she feels disturbed by the indefinite uneasiness at the back of her mind and she leapt from her chair in terror, overcome by a sensation of snakes, of evil, of an insane death. The cooing of doves for mating seems to Maya as an omen of ill-fortune and the cry of peacock reminds her of death. She thinks:

Peacocks are wise. The hundred eyes upon their tails have seen the truth of life and death and know them to be one. Living they are aware of death. Dying they are in love with life. (96)

Maya realizes that memories of the magician and his prophecy are just hallucinations and she is becoming insane. She talks to herself:

God, now I was in the net of the inescapable, and where lay the possibility of mercy of release? The net was no hallucination no... Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love, and I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I'll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore - only death and waiting. (98)

Her inner tension gives rise to her severe headaches. Her obsession with death leads her to think that, "it was not to be either Gautama, or I." And she finally decides for Gautama. Due to this death obsession, she drifts away from the normal to abnormal world where she lives all alone.

Again Maya is introverted and self-centered. She always complains about over busy schedule of Gautama but does not respond to the sympathetic attitude of her husband whenever he wants to give her emotional back up. So Gautama feels annoyed and calls her "neurotic" (115). He even keeps himself busy in his work in order to keep his own ego under control. In her childhood, she has realized that her father's behaviour is cold, terse and grim towards her brother but the self-centered Maya never expresses her feelings of disagreement to her father's cruel behaviour towards Arjuna. Instead, she flourishes her father's egoism as well as her own. She keeps herself aloof from her neighbours and doesn't know who lives in neighbourhood and that's why she feels strangers around her. Further, she lacks intimacy with her friends or with their views and attitude to life. Unlike her friends, Leila and Pom who are submissive and adjusting to their circumstances, Maya has high sense of individualism and uniqueness. Her egoism doesn't allow her to change herself into a submissive and resigned wife of a realist and detached husband. Her individuality is not well-guided and well-directed due to her unwholesome childhood and her peculiar nature and she becomes lost. Her individuality makes her feel alienated from people, friends and

family so much that she murders Gautama and probably later commits suicide.

Maya's brother, Arjuna is also a victim of psychological alienation. Being a motherless child, he wants love and affection from his father. But his father has treated him indifferently. Unlike Maya, his behaviour towards Arjuna was cold, terse and grim. He never feels at home and loves to remain outdoor. He has developed a feeling of 'sibling rivalry' against Maya as his father has given all his love to her and given him only his scolds. His father's behaviour has drifted him away from him and her sister. As he does not get the love of his family members he runs away from home and leads a life of labourer. After a long time, he writes a letter to his sister full of taunts and not brotherly affection. He says that he has no one in this whole world with whom he can share his feelings. He has got hatred and that's why, he can't give love to the others.

Lastly, Gautama seems to be leading a normal, sufficient, healthy life in modern society. But he was also psychologically alone. Under the influence of his mother, he has become a practical realist. No doubt, he is reserved by nature and is a successful lawyer but he is not ready to concede and to compromise. He is detached not by nature but by his circumstances. He is not married till his middle age. His mother is a social worker and busy in her life. So he has detached himself from the world and deeply involved himself in his work. He gets married with Maya, a girl who is quite younger to him. He is looking in her a partner who can understand him. But Maya is childish in nature, and a spoilt child of a wealthy father who marries him seeking an imagining father image in Gautama. So, he sinks into the lonely world of his own. Their indifferent attitudes and their indifferent requirements have made them go apart. He becomes so much distressed that he hardly cares about his wife, and her anguish and her pain. To divert his mind, he even moves to literature and Nature. But it is difficult for him to understand it and enjoy it. One thing which gives him pleasure is his work. So he keeps himself over-busy in his work. As he says: "The work piles up. I have not closed one case, and the second is already waiting" (173). No doubt he has his mother, wife, sister but no one understands him. So he has made himself over busy with his work and alienates himself from his family.

Thus, *Cry, the Peacock* presents the psychological alienation of Maya, a young girl who is obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, a disaster which cannot be averted. She suffers from neurotic fantasy and the phlegmatic and stolid attitude of her husband. Her alienation, as such is both situational and psychological. The bigger gap in their age also hampers the progression of normal healthy husband wife relationship. Her childlessness and unwholesome childhood environment too have a bearing on her psyche followed by her remembering albino astrologer's prophecy of death of either spouse

after four years of their marriage. This makes her neurotic, self centered and a creature of her lonely cage and she contemplates death for her husband and suicide for her. In short, alienation of the characters in *Cry, the Peacock* is not related to the reality of the circumstances but is a by-product of their own consciousness.

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